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SUBJECT: Port Sudan Union Protest: Harbinger of Election Activism?

REF: A) 09 KHARTOUM 1033

¶1. (SBU) Summary: 250 members of a politically-influential union of dockworkers operating in Port Sudan were arrested during a peaceful demonstration at the offices of Governor (Wali) al-Tahir Ella on 10 January. Union organizers had previously attempted to call a general assembly to discuss speculation that the Government of Sudan (GoS) had entered into negotiations to sell the port to a multi-national Arab company, but a local government entity that regulates the activities of trade unions and other Sudanese Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) failed to provide the necessary permit for the union to assemble. Numerous political experts are watching trade unions with interest as the elections approach, with some speculating that, at least in Eastern Sudan, trade guilds such as the Stevedores' Union could take a leading role in mobilizing and organizing voters in the April elections. End Summary.

Arrest and Release of Demonstrators

¶2. (SBU) On 10 January, a group of 250 dockworkers were arrested during a peaceful demonstration in front of the offices of Red Sea State's governor, Wali al-Tahir Ella. According to protest organizers, the demonstrators were arrested for disturbing the peace and assembling in public without a permit. Union leaders have confirmed that the arrestees were treated decently while detained, and all were released within hours. Sudanese media outlets have indicated that both the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) and the Communist Party helped to organize the protest. A leading member of Sudan's Communist Party, Babakir al-Shafa'e, confirmed the presence of party members at the incident, but stated that the Communist Party "supported, but did not engineer" the protest, which he characterized as "apolitical."

Assembly Permit Denied

¶3. (SBU) Those arrested were all members of the opposition-aligned, 2160-member Stevedores' Union in Eastern Sudan,

who had gathered to petition Ella to allow the union to convene its General Assembly, after the local government had failed to process the necessary permits to hold the meeting. While all parties agree that no assembly permit was issued, it is unclear whether the fault lies with the local government for failing to process the necessary paperwork, or whether the Stevedores' Union neglected to turn in all of the required documents, as National Congress Party (NCP)-aligned Union leader al-Tahir Adroub has intimated. (Note: Many have reported that the GoS routinely exploits bureaucratic red tape as a means of restricting political activity of opposition groups (reftel). End Note.)

14. (SBU) By all accounts, the Stevedore's Union is a powerful group with significant financial resources and strong political ties to opposition parties. According to Union leadership, members are required to pay annual dues, and contribute a small amount for each shift worked. These moneys are then pooled by Union leadership into cooperative investments, with port infrastructure playing a significant part in the investment portfolio. Rumors that Port Sudan's facilities had been, or would soon be, privatized and sold to a multinational Arab corporation triggered concerns within the Stevedores' Union over the disposition of its assets, and prompted the demand for a general assembly to call for a stop to privatization. Protest organizer Mohammed Oson said that, while the Stevedores' Union had concerns about the possibility of privatization, the protest that ensued was

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directly related to the interference of a local governmental body, the Registrar of Cooperative Societies, which refused to issue the permit allowing the General Assembly to convene.

Protests May Continue

15. (SBU) The Union maintains that it has the right to assemble to discuss internal financial matters, and claims that, in denying the necessary permits, the local government illegally interfered with this right. Mohammed Oson has announced that the GoS must allow the General Assembly to convene within the next three days, or face continued demonstrations.

16. (SBU) Comment: While the dispute between the Stevedores' Union and the government of Red Sea State is rooted in financial concerns, the political implications of the protest and arrests cannot be ignored. The Communist Party has claimed only limited involvement, but union leaders have nonetheless taken this incident as an opportunity to direct recriminations at the NCP and the national government. Numerous political experts are watching trade unions with interest as the elections approach, with some speculating that, at least in Eastern Sudan, trade guilds such as the Stevedores' Union will take a leading role in mobilizing and organizing voters in the April elections. End Comment.

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